Western issues: In defense of the cowboy and his cows

JIM STILES

I've always had a love-hate relationship with cows. I've cursed them loudly when they turned my favorite mountain meadow into a cow pie-strewn wasteland. But then, they taste so good.

I've inched my way through a herd of these stupid beasts on some highway as their cowboy masters moved them to summer range or to the feedlot and the hammer and hook, and I've wondered if I could ever grow accustomed to their reeking, fly-riddled flanks.

But then, have you ever seen lovelier eyelashes than those adorning a Hereford cow? If any of my ex-girlfriends had been able (or willing) to bat eyelashes like that at me, who knows where those relationships might have gone?

When I see a herd of those heavy-set ungulates trampling yet another meadow, I am appalled at the damage. Yet when I see yet another field turned into a condo development, I ask myself: Is a burned-out meadow as bad as this?

I have lost patience with ranchers who abuse the land they make a living from, but I'm careful not to paint all ranchers with the same broad stroke. If someone tried to tell me that rancher Heidi Redd didn't understand the heart of the American West, I'd punch them in the nose. She has lived most of a life at Dugout Ranch in San Juan County, Utah, and I'm glad she's there.

I've been reminded that the Cowboy Myth is just that, but then I wonder, isn't that what we need more of these days? What is it with this cynical 21st century culture of ours that makes us want to tear our myths and heroes apart?

Beyond my irrational defense of the cowboy and his cow, there's the reality of a commodity-driven society. Back in the "good old days" of 20 years ago, Western land issues seemed much easier to define. We didn't give much thought to the ranchers, or to the communities that were built upon ranching, or what would happen to the ranches themselves — the century-old homes and barns tucked under ancient cottonwood trees, the alfalfa fields in the valleys that are as much a part of the Western landscape as the mountains that rise above them.

Environmentalists didn't consider then, and many don't care now, about what might become of the rural West if public-lands ranching ends. Environmentalists have embraced tourism and recreation as a clean alternative to the kinds of traditional extractive industries, including ranching, that have not been good to the land. And, of course, tourism has always been a key component in many small-town economies — as it should be.

It's the runaway tourism/growth/expansion of towns like Moab that should worry us. Exploding tourist numbers transform a community, shifting the emphasis of the town away from the people who live there and toward the tourists who don't. Meanwhile, there's more damage to public lands than ever before, from both motorized and non-motorized use.

Most of Utah's Spanish Valley, once a bucolic mish-mash of alfalfa fields, cow pastures, junk cars and funky homes, is vanishing in a sea of condo developments and second homes. There's a vital question for all of us when we talk about the highest and best use of a piece of land: What does that mean when it comes to water and farmland?

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Last summer, a friend and I were discussing the fires sweeping the West. The conversation turned to water, and my friend, the owner of a recreation-based company, complained bitterly about the amount of water devoted to agriculture in Colorado.

"Did you know," he asked, "that 80 percent of the water in Colorado is used for agriculture? Yet farming and ranching only constitute 14 percent of the economy."

I surprised him by saying, "So what?"

He growled in disbelief.

"Well what would you prefer?" I answered. "Take the agricultural lands in many of the valleys in Colorado. Would you rather see them save the water for human consumption and encourage 50,000 people to move into the area?"

"No," he replied. "I don't want that either."

I shook my head. "Well, it's going to be one or the other. As B. Traven once said, 'This is the real world, muchacho, and we are all in it.' Do you think they'll just let the water flow slowly to the sea? Somebody's going to make money off that water."

I understand the points made by "cow-free" advocates. But at a time when the "amenities economy" is creating an entirely new threat to the American West, a West free of ranching makes no sense at all.

Jim Stiles is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News *(hcn.org). He is the publisher of the* Canyon Country Zephyr, *a bimonthly paper in Moab.*

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